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ABSTRACT

This profile of the English language teaching situation in Singapore examines the role of English in society and in the educational system. It is noted: (1) that English is the most important of the four official languages, (2) that education is provided in the four languages on the primary and secondary levels, and (3) that English is the medium of instruction on the university level. The number of hours allocated to English instruction, the numbers of teachers and students involved in it, various projects and government policies, and the regional English Language Centre are described. The composition of the teaching cadre is discussed. It is noted that most direct English teaching is now done by native Singaporeans and that teacher training and recruitment are government responsibility. Also discussed are English language textbook and other materials supports, English outside the educational system, and British and U.S. support for the teaching of English. (AMH)

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ENGLISH TEACHING PROFILE

Country: SINGAPORE **Date: December 1981**

1. Role of English

There are four official languages in Singapore. They are, in order of importance; English, Chinese (Mandarin), Malay (The National language) and Tamil.

Only a minority of Singaporeans have English or Mandarin as the first language. The majority of the population is Chinese in origin and most people speak one of the many Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Cantonese and so on) although there is a current emphasis on Mandarin at the expense of the dialects. It is possible but difficult to get by without knowing English, as official forms, advertisements, newspapers, TV and radio make provision for the other languages. However, the rapid expansion of commerce and industry as well as the emphasis placed on technical and vocational education has increased the importance of English and the disadvantages of being without it are becoming more and more apparent to the population as a whole. Indeed the importance of English has been stressed increasingly by the government over the last five years.

At primary and secondary levels education is provided in each of the four official languages and parents are free to choose the medium of instruction for their children's education. Secondary level non-English medium education is to disappear entirely by 1985. Only under 10% of it is now in Mandarin and there is no further Tamil or Malay secondary education. Primary education is also rapidly moving towards a solely English language medium.

Breakdown of the 1980 figures for Primary and Secondary Education (combined) in the four language streams in Singapore.

Stream	Total student enrolment of primary and secondary combined
English	375,552 (82.0%)
Chinese	80,334 (17.5%)
Malay	1,788 (0.4%)
Tamil	126 (0.03%)
Total	457,800

All tertiary education is now English medium. Nanyang University was merged with Singapore University in 1980 to form the English medium National University of Singapore.

The emphasis now is on English medium education with, for the abler students, bilingualism with English and the 'mother tongue'. The mother-tongue of all Chinese people is normally expected to be Mandarin (dialects are discouraged), and the mother-tongue of Indians is usually Tamil.

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The policy of bilingualism has created serious logistic problems for the Ministry of Education which has at once to find enough teachers capable of teaching in English and employment for those established teachers only capable of teaching in one of the other three languages. It has also led to a high dropout rate among children who have not been able to cope with learning in a second language. The Ministry has recently acknowledged that some pupils are not capable of becoming truly bilingual and for these reduced exposure to the second language is now possible.

2. English within the educational system

Number of hours allocated to the teaching of English and second language at primary and secondary level per week.

Subject	Hours allocated per week Primary		Secondary	
	hrs	%	hrs	%
English	7	29.60	5.3	20
2nd language	4.5	19.02	4	15

The number of teachers and pupils involved with second language teaching.

	No of teachers	No of pupils
English	1,099	77,281
Chinese	2,923	276,238
Malay	1,170	82,901
Tamil	229	15,714
Total	5,421	452,134

In the last five years, there have been considerable increases in the number of teachers involved with Mandarin as a second language and corresponding decreases in the number involved in English as a second language. All secondary schools will be English medium by 1985, and Primary schools are following the same trend.

In non-English medium schools the second language is always English. In English medium schools the second language may be Chinese, Malay or Tamil. However the terms 'first' and 'second' language in this context are not really accurate from the point of view of most pupils attending Singapore schools. For example, a Hokkien-speaking child attending an English medium school and taking Mandarin as his second language has a 'first' language which is really his second language and a 'second' language whose primary aim is to enable him to master the written form of his first language. The confusion of the terms 'first language' and 'medium of instruction' obscures the fact that most children entering English medium schools are learning English as a second

language. It is of interest that some families who speak English at home send their children to Chinese medium schools so that they can learn the language of their ancestors. With four official languages and the freedom for parents to choose the 'first' and 'second' languages their children will study, the permutations are almost endless.

The aim now is that the study or use of the second language in primary schools should occupy 43% of curriculum time. To some extent principals are able to choose the areas of the curriculum they will teach in the second language: thus a Chinese medium school can decide to teach physical education and art and craft in English. But in general the requirement is that English medium schools should teach social studies ('Education for living' - an amalgam of civics and moral education) in Chinese, Malay or Tamil. However 'Education for Living' is now being replaced by moral education. The non-English medium schools are required to teach science and mathematics in English. Some flexibility in the choice of subject areas is allowed to help principals overcome problems of timetabling and staffing.

The government's policy of bilingualism has now almost reached fruition. It does, of course, blur the distinction between English and non-English medium schools. In effect all schools will teach mathematics and science in English, and most of the rest of the curriculum in Chinese, Malay or Tamil. There are however obvious difficulties in putting this policy into practice and fears are increasingly voiced of an overall deterioration in the standard of both first and second languages. It is probable that adjustments and modifications will have to be made. Nevertheless, the government is committed to bilingualism as a basic educational objective.

The Primary Pilot Project in which the British Counil was involved in the early-mid 70s produced materials which have been now discarded. A new department of the Ministry of Education, the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS) has been set up to initiate curriculum development and materials production. The Council has advised in the setting up of the CDIS (see the Morris-Thompson report) and has also led the design writing team for the Correct Use of English (CUE) materials project.

A formal distinction is made between English language and English literature from the secondary I level in English medium schools. This leads to the separate examination of these subjects at GCE 'O' level. Until a few years ago the English degree course at the University of Singapore was almost entirely literary in content. There has been pressure for change and the study of English Language, stylistics and linguistics now occupies 50% of curriculum time.

The results of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), now a streaming device to decide the type of secondary education pupils will follow, are worked out with the following weighting:

First language	-	2
Second language	-	2
Mathematics	-	1
Science	-	1

Since mathematics and science subjects are taught in English, two thirds of the PSLE is dependent in effect on the student's competence in English.

In order to move from Secondary IV to the two year pre-university course, pupils from English medium schools require a pass in English in the Singapore/ Cambridge GCE 'O' level which includes a test of oral English. Papers can be taken in Chinese, Malay or Tamil but in 1974 70% of candidates opted to

take their examinations in English. Pupils in non-English medium schools take an 'O' level paper in English as a second language set by the Ministry of Education. A pass in this paper is not essential for promotion to a Chinese or Malay pre-university course, but as places are filled on a competitive basis a pass confers an obvious advantage.

All candidates for the Singapore/Cambridge GCE 'A' level examination take a compulsory General Paper which is heavily weighted towards English and includes an essay and a comprehension exercise.

In 1970 an Advisory Committee on Curriculum Development was set up under the direction of of Dr Ruth Wong, Director of the Institute of Education. Since then various subject standing committees have been working out syllabuses and guidelines which set national standards for the schools. Subject integration, although considered desirable, is not provided for in these syllabuses. There are separate syllabuses for English as a 'first' language and English as a 'second' language. The process of curriculum renewal has not yet reached the secondary schools. These mainly follow their own devices in preparing pupils for the Singapore/Cambridge 'O' level English papers which include objective tests of structure and lexis.

Principals select basic textbooks from an approved booklist supplied by the Ministry of Education. Publishers wishing to have a textbook included in the list submit it to the Ministry, which appoints a panel of assessors to decide on its suitability. The assessors, whose identities are not revealed, arrive independently at their assessments which are forwarded to a coordinator who makes the final decision. Textbooks are approved for a period of five years.

Principals can decide the choice of supplementary readers, literature books, reference books and library books without reference to the Ministry. To lighten the financial load on parents who have to pay for all textbooks, principals are enjoined to make as few changes in prescribed textbooks as possible.

Since many students at tertiary level are products of Chinese medium schools, it has been found necessary to provide them with courses in remedial English appropriate to their subjects of study. Thus the National University of Singapore and other tertiary institutions have set up their own Language Centres/Units which concentrate on proficiency courses in English as well as other languages and particularly English for Special Purposes (ESP) relevant to areas such as business studies or technical training. There is also a Civil Service Staff Development Unit which conducts courses in English for civil servants.

The Adult Education Board has been absorbed by the Vocational and Industrial Training Board, which is responsible to the Ministry of Science and Technology, and not the Ministry of Education. This Board provides language and literacy classes in the four official languages of the Republic. English classes are the most popular with an average enrolment of around 5,800 a month. Since literacy is no longer a major problem in Singapore most students attend with the aim of gaining proficiency in English as a second or third language. The classes prepare students for the Standard I, II and III Language Examinations (intended mainly for civil servants) conducted by the Ministry of Education and for the Language Examinations at elementary and intermediate levels conducted by the Board. In addition over 3,000 day-school students attend special English language classes designed to improve their English. The Board has a 40-booth language laboratory and prepares students for a wide range of examinations including GCE 'O' and 'A' levels, Institute of Bankers and the Chartered Institute of Secretaries.

Singapore has an effective Educational Television (ETV) Service (now a division of the CDIS) for schools which includes programmes in English and on ELT.

ELT television and radio programmes for general consumption are now broadcast by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) and have recently included 'The Sadrina Project' and 'Follow Me'.

The Regional English Language Centre (RELC)

This is a project of the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) which is hosted by Singapore. The Centre was set up with financial support from the US government. Member countries at the present time are Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

RELC has also received support from ODA and the British Council notably in the form of professional staff (see paragraph 6) and the supply of books and audio-visual equipment, including a 32-booth language laboratory. During its interim operation period (1968-71) and the first permanent operational phase (1972-76) the main efforts of the Centre have been directed towards the training programme. Singapore has participated fully in the various courses run by the Centre. A certain amount of work has also been done in the fields of research and in instructional materials development.

Full details of RELC's programmes are to be found in the Centre's Annual Reports, copies of which are lodged with Central Information Unit, English Language Division.

It should be emphasised that since RELC is a regional institution it can exercise only an indirect influence on ELT in Singapore.

3. **Teachers of English**

There is a small number of British and American specialists and part-time teachers working in the various institutional Language Centres but most direct English teaching within the educational system is now undertaken by Singaporeans. However, the Ministry of Education has a new scheme to recruit up to 400 highly qualified expatriate English teachers on attractive terms and more than 50 have already arrived in Singapore.

In English medium schools most teachers teach some English. Subject specialisation in English does not start until the upper secondary or pre-university classes. In non-English medium schools most English teaching is performed by language teachers who are subject specialists. Many of these are untrained but have attended one of a series of in-service training courses designed to upgrade their capability. There is a continuing general shortage of qualified teachers of English in the schools. There is a growing tendency towards specialisation of English language teachers in all schools. The British Council ran during 1980/81 a one-year part-time programme leading to the RSA Certificate TESL (Singapore) for more than 80 graduate secondary school English teachers, and a further group of 80 is currently taking the same course.

The initial training of all teachers in the Republic is undertaken by the Institute of Education, which also conducts postgraduate courses and awards degrees in education. The Director, Dr Ruth Wong, has been striving to upgrade the quality of her staff, many of whom have obtained higher qualifications in Britain under the Commonwealth Education Fellowship Scheme. A three-year part-time course for non-graduates was introduced in 1973, but

this is hardly an effective substitute for a sufficient number of adequately qualified teachers of English. A scheme was announced by the Ministry of Education whereby selected English teachers are sent to Britain for further English studies, and the Ministry has also tried, without much success, to recruit teachers of English from Britain. The UK training scheme has never functioned adequately, though several attempts have been made to introduce something of this kind and the Ministry are eager to attain success in this direction.

The English Language Teachers Association of Singapore (ELTAS) whilst not moribund, is also not a powerful active body.

4. Materials Support

There are no problems of distribution and all texts appearing in the Ministry's approved booklists are normally available. The fact that parents are required to purchase textbooks (special arrangements are made for those who cannot afford to do so) means that most classes use the one or two approved texts selected for a particular subject for a whole year. At the lower primary level in particular it would seem advantageous for each class to have a wide range of readers and other textbooks which would allow the teacher more flexibility of approach. So long as parents own the books used by their children, it will be difficult to change the present system.

Fairly generous grants are made to schools for the purchase of book corner and library books, and schools which make good use of these can do much to compensate for the sometimes dull fare provided by the approved texts.

The consolidated list of all the English language textbooks recommended for English and non-English medium schools runs to several pages, and is revised annually. Singapore is a difficult market for publishers in that it is both small and highly competitive. They are therefore wary of investing large sums on books which even if approved have to compete with many rivals. Books presented for approval must be at least in proof form and publishers must guarantee to complete any series started.

The list of books approved for English in primary non-English medium classes is somewhat thin, although some quite successful illustrated primary readers have been produced locally. The situation at the secondary level in non-English medium schools is variable: several imported courses (for example 'English 901', 'Success with English') have been approved, but a really suitable ELT secondary course is badly needed.

Singapore is a mecca for electronic equipment and tape recorders and film projectors are cheap and easily available. Most schools possess the hardware, but there is hardly any locally-produced software to go with it.

5. English outside the educational system

The main entrepreneurs in the commercial field are Stamford College and Inlingua (which is affiliated to the European branch of the Berlitz School). Stamford College uses BBC texts such as 'Getting on in English' by John Haycraft and 'Meet the Parkers' by David Hicks and has a language laboratory. It has a total enrolment of about 1,500 full-time, 3,500 part-time and 1,300 correspondence students, most of whom are concerned with the English needed for secretarial, accountancy, GCE, and other such qualifications. Inlingua is well staffed and equipped and tends to cater for the more affluent students.

6. British support for the teaching of English

The Council is very active in this field through its Direct Teaching of English Operation (DTEO), which in the first term of 1982 will involve almost 2,000 students, in over 6,000 classroom hours and 85,000 student hours of ELT involving General English, Teacher Training and ESP. The Council Centre work included 240 hours per week of ELT for the Ministry of Education. The Regional English Language Centre (RELC) is also very active in ELT for the general market, and there are also courses run by Inlingua and ATT. (A new association between ATT and International Language Centres commenced in December 1981).

The Council is involved in the recruitment of staff for institutions in Singapore. There are no VSOs working in Singapore.

7. American support for the teaching of English

The US government made a major financial contribution to the building and running costs of the Regional English Language Centre. No direct support is given to ELT in Singapore, although a few individual Americans, with or without financial assistance from for example the Asia Foundation, teach English in tertiary institutions.